A

SERMON

Preached before the Honourable

House of Commons,

AT

St. *Margaret's* WESTMINSTER;

ON

Wednesday, FEBRUARY 17, 1747-8.

Being the Day appointed by his MAJESTY's Royal Proclamation for a General Fast.

By SAMUEL NICOLLS, LL.D.
Chaplain in Ordinary to his MAJESTY.

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Ordered,

That the thanks of this houſe be given to the Reverend Dr. *Nicolls*, for the Sermon by him preached this day before this houſe, at St. *Margaret's Weſtminſter*; and that he be deſired to print the ſame. And that Mr. *Whichcot* and Mr. *Weſt* do acquaint him therewith.

J. Dyſon,
Cl. Dom' Com'

PSALM lvii. 1.

Be merciful unto me, O God, be merciful unto me, for my ſoul truſteth in thee: yea, in the ſhadow of thy wings will I make my refuge, until theſe calamities be overpaſt.

IN the many ſudden changes of David's life, from proſperous to adverſe, from adverſe to proſperous eſtate, it is very obſervable what that principle was, which did ſo equally poiſe and regulate his paſſions, as to keep his ſoul calm and unmoved in the two extremes of ſucceſs and misfortune.

God choſe him out to be governor over his people, and raiſed him high in honour and power. But as all honours are, he found it of an uncertain and mixt enjoyment; ſometimes lifted up to a giddy height of proſperity, again, *diminiſhed and brought low through oppreſſion, through much*

much plague and trouble (*a*); often interrupted by jealouſies and diviſions, ever poſſeſt with anxiety and fear. But in all theſe changes of condition, whether he ſat high in dignity, as the king's ſon-in-law, or was forced to hide himſelf from the envy of Saul in caves and deſerts; whether he glorioufly ſwayed the ſcepter over Iſrael, or heavily *fled out of the land for Abſalom* (*b*), there was ſtill one prevailing principle, which kept his mind compoſed and ſteady under all theſe ſhocks of fortune. A firm confidence and truſt in the providence of God, was the baſis on which all his hopes were founded: the only comfort that could ſupport and relieve his mind, when ſorrow oppreſt him; the only conſideration that could awe and check his thoughts, when tranſported with the giddineſs of power. In the moſt depreſt ſtate of his affairs, he *encouraged himſelf in the Lord his God, and would not be afraid for ten thouſand of the people, that had ſet themſelves againſt him round about* (*c*): though ſo ſharp and

(*a*) Pſalm cvii. 39. (*b*) 2 Samuel xix. 9. (*c*) Pſalm iii. 6.

powerful was their malice towards him, that, as he confesses, he must *utterly have fainted under it*, if he had not been stedfast in his belief and trust to *see the goodness of the Lord* (d). And when a happy reverse of fortune had placed him on high, and fenced him in on every side, that no enemy durst approach to hurt him; this security and joyful change of condition made no alteration in his sentiments, as to his dependance upon God, but rather added wings to his devotion, and carried his grateful soul with greater force and rapidity towards heaven. *He put no trust in his bow, nor was it his sword that helped him; but it was God that deliver'd him from his enemies, and from the hand of them that hated him* (e). Vain was all other dependance, deceitful in the needful time of trouble: therefore, *some might trust in their chariots, and some in their horses, but he would remember the name of the Lord his God* (f).

We are wont to admire the glorious actions and success of David's life, and

(d) Psalm xxvii. 13. (e) Psalm xliv. 6, 7. (f) Psalm xx. 7.

can

can look up to the example he has ſet us of wiſdom and courage: let us be perſuaded to imitate him alſo in his piety and devotion, the inſtrument which convey'd thoſe bleſſings to him. And now that we are aſſembled in the preſence of God, upon a like occaſion with that which often carried him into the ſanctuary of the Lord, to implore the divine bleſſing and protection againſt the deſigns of malicious enemies; let the ſame ſpirit come upon us, which actuated his devotions; while we thus humble ourſelves under God's afflicting hand; while we ſupplicate his forgiveneſs of thoſe crimes, which have brought upon us the calamities of a devouring war; till by our ſtedfaſt truſt in his providence we obtain from him the happy reſtoration of our affairs, *and the Lord give unto us his people the bleſſing of peace* (g).

Deliverances from former dangers, as they are a good proof of the piety and ſtrict morals of thoſe nations thus favoured by providence; ſo are they likewiſe a ſure

(g) Pſalm xxix. 10.

foun-

foundation of hope and encouragement for the time to come; that if they perſiſt in calling upon the God of their fathers, and are careful to tread in their ſteps, the ſame God, who ſo conſtantly delivered their fathers out of all their troubles, ſhall let them alſo ſee his ſalvation. This was ever David's laſt appeal, to the juſtice and righteouſneſs of God; who, however his mercy might turn the fierceneſs of his wrath away from the diſobedient, and cauſe his anger towards a ſinful nation to ceaſe, was yet very exact in rewarding piety, and never ſuffered a juſt and devout people to periſh in their diſtreſs. In all his afflictions therefore, this was David's anchor of hope; through all the ſtorms of his troubled life, here he rode ſafe under ſhelter of his integrity. Upon a review of the work of providence throughout all time, from the moſt ancient to the lateſt ages of the world, *he had never ſeen the righteous forſaken (b)*; and in the ſtrength of this confidence he makes his addreſs to God for deliverance, as every other people

(b) Pſalm xxxvii. 25.

may,

may, who are careful to shelter themselves under his protection, *Be merciful unto me, O God, be merciful unto me, for my soul trusteth in thee; yea, in the shadow of thy wings will I make my refuge, until these calamities be overpast.*

These words of the Psalmist plainly imply, that without a firm dependance and confidence in God, he thought there was no support against the shocks of adversity. And the voice of reason concurs with his experience to make it evident,

That as well in publick as private affairs, whenever calamity overtakes us, our peace and security intirely depends upon the share we have of God's favour and protection.

That therefore it is necessary at all times, and especially in the time of trouble, to have recourse unto him, and express our trust and dependance.

That religion, or the fear of God, is our only security in the evil day of affliction, will appear from considering the nature of God, and the direct tendency of

virtue and vice, together with the examples of divine providence in the courſe of human affairs.

The Almighty Creator and Governor of the world, being a God of infinite wiſdom, holineſs, juſtice, and truth, muſt govern it in ſuch a manner as to ſhew his love for virtue, and his hatred of vice. For it is impoſſible that he ſhould contradict his own nature; and therefore cannot be ſuppoſed either to favour vice, which is oppoſite to him, or diſcountenance virtue, which reſembles himſelf. As he is a God of power all nature is in his hands: his wiſdom directs every thing for the beſt: his holineſs is too pure to ſuffer iniquity: and his juſtice and truth is concerned to ſee, that virtue has its reward, and vice its puniſhment.

The manner indeed of the divine procedure, in this impartial diſpenſation of his favour or diſpleaſure, is not always viſible to human eyes. He acts by ſecret and imperceptible means. There is a courſe of events fairly written in his infinite mind, which are ſeen by us only in

part. There lies determined the fate of kingdoms, far different from our present conception, either to ruin or exaltation, unto latest succeeding ages. He lifteth up a poor and distressed state, and setteth it on high, till it becomes mistress of the world. *The lofty city, he layeth it low, he layeth it level with the ground* (*i*); and prepares fatal revolutions for those secure nations, which at present seem covered with success and glory. But though these events lie hid from our sight, undiscoverable by the sharpest penetration, yet from the nature of God we assuredly know, as he is a lover of righteousness, and a hater of iniquity, that to every pious and virtuous people he administers safety and protection, while for the wicked and vicious he is laying up treasures of wrath.

This point will receive fuller illustration, and appear to us in the plainest light, if we consider, that virtue and vice have a direct tendency to promote the same ends, and that God, who loves to act by ways most agreeable to our reason and

(*i*) Isaiah xxvi. 5.

nature, ought to carry along with it its own reward, and vice its own punishment. For upon consideration it will be found, that virtue and piety in their own nature promote the welfare and glory of a nation; and, on the contrary, vice and wickedness naturally tend to undermine and overthrow it, and by a long train of evil consequences bring on misery and desolation.

Religion is the strongest bond and cement of society, teaching all those frugal and manly virtues, by which a nation is upheld, and made to flourish: instilling into magistrates a gentle and tender spirit, which inclines them to govern mildly, and punish with compassion; begetting in the people a disposition to obey willingly, and suffer with patience; and engaging both magistrates and people to that mutual trust and confidence in each other, which is so necessary to support the reputation and strength of a kingdom; and finally, inspiring men with such noble sentiments of liberty, and with those true principles of moderation and public spirit, which can-

not fail, when they become of general influence, to procure their happy country proſperity at home and ſucceſs abroad.

By virtue, and the ſteady practice of religion, men are taught diligence and induſtry in their proper callings, on the promoting of which the wealth and power of a people ſo eminently depend. Here every ſingle perſon may learn, how he may at once be ſerviceable to himſelf, and to his country; and while, by the honeſt labour of his hands, he is laying up a durable treaſure of wealth and credit for himſelf, he has this additional ſatisfaction of obſerving how the riches, and ſtrength, and reputation, of the community in which he lives, are increaſed by his active and induſtrious ſervice. While the idle and the vicious do both the ſtate and themſelves harm: they are an ungrateful weight and burden to the induſtrious, and only prey upon their labours; and to ſay the leaſt of them, they are hurtful members, if it be only becauſe they are uſeleſs. But the paſſage is eaſy from their having nothing to do, to the doing ill. Prodigality

and luxury bring them to want, and the want of means to ſupport their extravagance will tempt them to many crimes.

We may further draw a contraſt between vice and virtue, from the different influence they have upon a people in the time of their diſtreſs, and eſpecially in the day of battle. When piety and virtue would have its effect in making them ſtrong and powerful, courageous and valiant. For it unites them in heart and affection, and knits them together in mutual love and friendſhip; ſo that they are in every thing of one accord, and of one mind: by which means a ſincere truſt and confidence in one another is produced; from whence ariſes unity of counſel and deſign, and a hearty zeal for the publick good. This joined to a generoſity of temper, and conducted with that induſtry and application which religion inſpires, muſt render them powerful and formidable, and give them the ſtrongeſt probability of ſucceſs in their juſt and prudent undertakings. But vice ſeparates thoſe bonds which virtue unites, divides their counſels, confounds their deſigns,

signs, and sowe the seeds of unnecessary fears, suspicions and jealousies among them; which, joined to the terrors of an evil conscience, render them irresolute and fearful at the approach of danger, and they turn their backs in the day of battle.

The same likewise may be shewn of every other virtue and vice. Is it not as true of the whole commonwealth, as of any particular member of it, that its prosperity and glory in the world depend upon the reputation of its fidelity and honour? Will not the good opinion, and confidence of other nations toward them, be mightily confirmed by the fame of their temperance, justice, and piety? Can any thing tend more to establish their credit among all people, and send the glory as well as terror of their name through the whole earth, than the good report of their being a people living in peace and unity among themselves, a nation of men, consisting but of one body inspired by one soul? Diligence, temperance, justice, charity, truth and fidelity, are the main pillars upon which a kingdom stands. Take

away

away the support of these virtues, and the state, like a building without foundation, will fall to the ground. These join and link together the several parts of a community, so as to contribute each their share towards the well being of the whole; and by their due composition and proper mixture, settle and confirm the constitution of the body politic.

Luxury and profuseness are evils big with mischiefs to the state in which they abound. The dishonour and scandal they bring is the least grievance; though that must give a deep wound to its trade and prosperity: but they are fatal in their consequences, in that they lay open the state to an inundation of wickedness, enfeeble and consume its strength, and expose it to all the terrible miseries of a national poverty. The opposite vice of covetousness is as destructive in its effects; and he is no less dangerous enemy to the welfare of his country, who hoards up useless wealth, than he that squanders it away. Unfaithfulness in agreements, injustice, falsehood, and perjuries, are vices

which

which have a moſt ſenſible and pernicious influence upon the good of communities, and by direct and ſpeedy conſequence extinguiſh the glory, the proſperity, the credit, and the very name of a people.

I might inſtance almoſt every virtue and vice, and ſhew the influence each of them has upon a ſtate, either to raiſe or to deſtroy it; if it were not already evident, that a virtuous nation does not loſe its reward, nor a vicious one its puniſhment, even in the natural order and courſe of things.

How much more, when God Almighty interpoſes alſo by his providence, who is a ſtrict exactor of juſtice, and a quick diſcerner of all the good and evil that is tranſacted in this buſy world? He is no incurious obſerver of the affairs of men, but takes particular notice even of the meaneſt part of the creation, and governs the whole fabric of the univerſe with a ſteady and unerring hand. For the proof of which we may appeal to the examples of all nations of the world, and confirm this truth by the teſtimony both of ſacred and profane hiſtory. Where a people

have

have been distinguished for their virtue and piety towards God, and their justice and fidelity among men, they have at the same time prospered greatly in wealth and honour, and proved a flourishing and glorious people. While, on the contrary, the nations where sin and wickedness abound, and vice and immorality are openly and in publick practised; where atheism and profaneness are boldly professed, and religion is daringly treated with ridicule and contempt, these are singled out to be a warning and a terror to the rest of the world.

Who can read the sad story of the Jews, a people once the favourites of God, and not be most sensibly affected with the truth of this observation? What a mighty people were they; how flourishing was their little state, upon their first settlement in the promised land? How bravely and successfully did they fight in battle, while God was their leader? How often, while they sheltered themselves under his banner, did he make thousands, and ten thousands, of their enemies to fly before a handful of

men? And when he had led them through the desert wilderness, where he supported them by a continued succession of miracles for forty years, *he brought them out*, as he had promised, *to a land for plenty flowing with milk and honey (k)*. But when they grew ungrateful to their benefactor, and turned aside from worshiping the Lord to serve idols, then God left off to fight for Israel; he gave them up into the power of their enemies, and they were carried captive into strange lands. And God made them that carried them away captive *to be lords over them (l)*. He caused their enemies to treat them with a severe and iron hand, if by any means they might be brought to feel the difference between the bondage of the world and his sweet service; to try if these severities would rouse them to consider, and consideration bring them to repentance. But when he found that they grew no better under these judgments, but much worse; and to all their other impieties, and monstrous crimes, they added this also, *to crucify the Lord of*

(k) Exod. iii. 8. (l) Psalm cvi. 40,

glory

glory (m), then their iniquities were full; God would let his vengeance wait no longer, he poured out deſtruction upon their city and nation. The relation of the diſmal end of this unhappy people, when the Roman armies compaſſed the city round with fire and ſword, is filled with the repreſentation of ſuch horrible ruin, as would make the eye weep that reads it. The waſteneſs and deſolation of all places! the cruel murders and bloody deſtruction which they brought one upon another! to what madneſs their civil diſcords and contentions drove them! The ſeeds of diſſention were ſown ſo thick among them, that it choaked all care of the publick good; and they more eagerly thirſted after the blood of one another, than of the common enemy. Such infatuation had ſeized all their counſels, God had given them up to ſuch a ſtrange deluſion, that when they were well able to guard their city againſt a ſtronger enemy, they left their walls to defend themſelves, and ſheathed their ſwords in their own bowels. And when the city

(m) 1 Cor. ii. 8.

was taken, though the commander uſed all poſſible caution to prevent further violence, and was extremely ſolicitous to preſerve their temple from the flames; yet nothing could hinder the threatning of divine vengeance from taking effect, *that one ſtone ſhould not be left upon another* (n).

Upon the whole then it plainly appears, that, whether we conſider the nature of God, or the direct tendency of vice and virtue, or the examples of divine providence in his government of the world, religion is the only principle, that can make us happy and proſperous; that in all the troubles and dangers which ſurround us, there can be no ſafety but in God's favour and protection.

It is ſurely, therefore, neceſſary at all times, and eſpecially in this needful time of trouble, to have recourſe unto him, and expreſs our truſt and dependance.

And for this purpoſe Authority hath called us together to a public faſt and humiliation, that we may with greater ſolemnity appear before God, and after an ex-

(n) Matthew xxiv. 2.

traordinary manner offer up our moſt earneſt and fervent prayers for the removing his anger, and procuring his favour. It is certainly no indifferent thing, and therefore is not to be neglected, not lightly paſſed over by us. It is no common ſacrifice which God now expects at our hands, but ſuch a ſincere offering, as may at once ſhew our zeal for the preſervation of our country, and the impreſſion which religion has made upon our minds.

God hath often in a remarkable manner diſtinguiſhed his providence over this nation; he has wrought for us many great and ſignal deliverances; and even then, when our enemies rejoiced, and were ready to triumph over us, he has ſnatched us as a prey out of their teeth. If we are truly ſenſible of this, we may hope, that he, who has ſo often ſhewn his loving-kindneſs in preſerving us from the hands of them that hated us, will now deliver us. But if after all that is come upon us *for our evil deeds, and for our great treſpaſſes, we ſhould ſtill break his commandments; will not God be angry with us, till he has conſumed*

conſumed us, ſo that there ſhall be no remnant nor eſcaping (o).

What will not the example of our own fathers teach us? *They truſted in God*; they made him alone their ſtrength and refuge, and from him they had a joyful deliverance: *they cried unto him, he heard their cry, and did help them (p). God therefore is our hope and ſtrength; In the ſhadow of his wings will we make our refuge, until theſe calamities be overpaſt.* Let us then be very earneſt in the buſineſs of this day, and ſhew by the firmneſs and confidence of our truſt in God, that we do from our hearts deſire the preſervation of our country. If we are cool and indifferent upon this occaſion, and while we are aſſembled in this houſe, to confeſs our ſins, and humbly implore the divine aſſiſtance, in all the ſolemnity of worſhip, our thoughts are wavering and unſettled, *this is not the faſt, which God hath choſen (q). The acceptable day to the Lord* muſt be ſpent in humble prayer, and ſorrowful confeſſion of our ſins, in hearty contrition, and holy reſo-

(o) Ezra ix. 13, 14. (p) Pſalm cxiv. 19. (q) Iſaiah lviii. 5.

lution,

lution, and in all the duties of repentance. Neither let us think that the performing this day well is all that it is our duty to do. This is a good beginning of our sorrow and repentance, but the smoke of this sacrifice will not reach heaven, unless we feed the holy flame with daily offerings. If our fasting, our weeping, and praying is to continue but for one day, our goodness will then be *as the morning cloud, and as the early dew that passeth away* (x). But neither shall we thus have offered up an intire sacrifice. The duty we are engaged in does not relate solely to ourselves, and the examination of our own hearts, but extends likewise to the wants and necessities of others. The holy work of this day's fast will then appear to be sincerely performed, when we have testified our zeal by works of charity and bounty to the poor. This will *fight for us against our enemies*; our prayers offered up in this holy temper of mind, accompanied with these most pious vows and resolutions, shall *go up in sacrifice for a memorial before*

(x) Hosea vi. 4. (y) Psalm cxii. 34.

God,

God (s), shall assault heaven, and bring down the promised blessings of peace and tranquillity to the end of our days.

Divine providence, always watching for our good, has never ceased to admonish us by every kind of instruction; by raising our hopes, by alarming our fears, by judgments threatened, and promised mercies. Whether we have made all the improvement which might be expected, under the calamities suffered, and blessings enjoyed, it concerns every man to consider, and lay seriously to heart. However that be, the hand of providence goes on steadily in its work. *God fainteth not, neither is weary (t)*, nor will delay his purpose; but continues to visit the world uniformly, either with mercies or judgments, whether men are careful to observe them or not. It is now just a century, since, *for the wickedness of them that dwelt therein, this fruitful land was turned into barrenness (u)*, through the desolation of a civil war. After this terrible judgment had travelled through the land, God was pleased to think upon mer-

(s) Acts x. 4. (t) Isaiah xl. 28. (u) Psalm cvii. 34.

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cy by a ſpeedy reſtoration of our affairs. But the corruption was too generally diffuſed through the whole body to ſubſide of itſelf, and preſently broke out again in a fatal peſtilence; which was ſoon after purified in a dreadful fire. Here the deſtroying angel reſted, and mercy again took place: till, in the midſt of the moſt notorious impieties, and diſſolute manners, Popery lifted up its head, and had well nigh *taken away our place and nation (x)*. Through the merciful interpoſition of providence, we were delivered alſo from this danger; and by a happy revolution placed on a ſudden in the moſt free ſtate of peace and ſecurity. But deſtructive war ſoon interrupted our tranquillity; and though ſucceſs and victory always crowned our cauſe, yet muſt this too be thought a ſevere, though neceſſary evil. To this ſucceeded violent commotions at home, with dangerous attempts to overturn that ſettlement, which the hand of God had eſtabliſhed among us, and under which alone we could be ſafe. But it was only the *wicked*

(x) John xi. 48.

device of man's heart, and the abettors of it were *found to fight againſt God* (*y*). Then followed a long time of peace and plenty: the ſeas were open, and trade flouriſhed: *riches increaſed*; and as they increaſed, men more eagerly *ſet their hearts upon them* (*z*). This abundance of all things tempted to full enjoyment, and ſoon introduced every kind of exceſs. Luxury ſpread her wings, and pleaſure baſked herſelf in the ſunſhine of proſperity. It was now time for the watchful providence of God to break in upon this ſecurity, and warn us of our danger. A potent enemy comes in to diſturb our traffic, and ſpoil us of thoſe riches we ſo much abuſed. We went on ſtill in luxury and pleaſure, and God brought this other diſtreſs upon us, that of a more dangerous war, and with a more powerful enemy. But we did not ſufficiently attend to the deſign of God in this heavier judgment; and behold, he ſuffered anarchy and rebellion to riſe up among us, a band of deſperate and cruel men, to ſpoil, to ravage, and to deſtroy, in the very bowels

(*y*) Acts v. 39. (*z*) Pſalm lxii. 10.

of our country. This dreadful calamity alarmed us all, and we became inſtantly a thoughtful, conſiderate, and penitent people. *We cried unto God, and he delivered us alſo out of this diſtreſs (a)*: and now, from a ſtate of trouble and confuſion, all things are reſtored again; and we remain in the full enjoyment of our rights and liberties, I hope, even to the conviction of thoſe unhappy perſons themſelves.

May the ſame ſpirit of love and union, of piety and religion, which then prevailed, ſtill continue, to deliver us from the calamities of war which we yet ſuffer, and to make us a flouriſhing and happy people. Let us beſeech God to go forth with our fleets and armies. It is he that giveth victory, may the ſincerity and earneſtneſs of this day's humiliation obtain that advantage to us; that ſo the miſerable work of bloody war may be cut ſhort, and the common diſturber and troubler of our peace compelled to ceaſe from contention: that he may be reduced to the neceſſity of ſueing in earneſt for that, which he has ſo often uſed

(a) Pſalm cvii. 6.

as a pretence to deceive. *The words of his mouth are ſmoother than butter, but war is in his heart; his words are ſofter than oil, yet are they drawn ſwords (b)*: and laſtly, that it may be reſerved for the glory of our Sovereign, the religious obſerver of all his treaties and engagements, to be the happy inſtrument of God in compoſing the preſent differences, and reſtoring the peace and liberties of Europe. Till which deſirable end can be obtained, let us by *patient continuance in well doing*, incline the God of heaven to regard our cauſe: that, while the ſound of war is gone out from us, he would preſerve concord and unity at home; that he would give the direction of his Spirit to thoſe that conſult, and add ſtrength to the arms of thoſe that fight for us; and that he would enable us to obtain not only ſucceſs in our preſent undertakings, but the ſecurity alſo of our happy conſtitution in church and ſtate to us, and our poſterity, till time ſhall be no more.

(b) Pſalm lv. 21.

FINIS.

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